

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

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TAGS: PINT, EI

SUBJECT: FIANNA FAIL STILL LOOKING FOR ITS ROLE

REF: DUBLIN 1828

SUMMARY: OPPOSITION LEADER LYNCH HAS PROMOTED A LEADING RIVAL, CHARLES HAUGHEY, TO A MINOR POSITION ON FRON BENCH. LYNCH STILL APPEARS, HOWEVER, TO HAVE PARTY THOROUGHLY UNDER HIS CONTROL. HIS BIGGEST PROBLEM IS THAT FIANNA FAIL AS A WHOLE HAS STILL BEEN UNABLE TO REGROUP, RECRUIT TOP TALENT, AND FORM AN EFFECTIVE OPPOSITION. ANNUAL CONVENTION FEBRUARY 15-16 WAS DULL AFFAIR, WIT "FAMILY PLANNING" THE ONLY ISSUE ON WHICH POINTS COULD BE SCORED AGAINST CURRENT GOVERNMENT. FIANNA FAIL'S APPEAL TO VOTERS WILL SOON BE TESTED IN TWO BY-ELECTIONS. FAILURE TO WIN DECISIVELY WOULD WEAKEN LYNCH'S POSITION. END SUMMARY

1. OPPOSITION LEADER JACK LYNCH RESHUFFLED FIANNA FAIL FRONT BENCH JANUARY 30. MOST NEWSWORTHY CHANGE WAS PROMOTION OF CHARLES HAUGHEY FROM BACK BENCHES TO SHADOW CABINET. THE CHANGE, HOWEVER, OFFERED DUBIOUS ADVANTAGES FOR HAUGHEY. HE WAS GIVEN SHADOW HEALTH MINISTRY, WHICH IS ONE OF LEASE IMPORTANT. RESPONSIBILITY FOR THIS BRIEF WILL INHIBIT HIS SPEECHES ON MORE PRODUCTIVE TOPICS. FURTHER, HIS ARCHENEMY JAMES GIBBONS WAS APPOINTED TO THE MUCH MORE PRESTIGIOUS AGRICULTURE PORTFOLIO. BOTH FIANNA

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FAIL AND GOI SOURCES TELL US THAT LYNCH'S INTENTION WAS TO BRING

HAUGHEY UNDER BETTER CONTROL WITHOUT GIVING HIM A GOOD PLATFORM TO MOUNT A CHALLENGE FOR PARTY LEADERSHIP. NEVERTHELESS, HAUGHEY REMAINS ONE OF LEADING TALENTS IN A DRAB OPPOSITION. HE COMMANDS CONSIDERABLE SUPPORT IN GRASS ROOTS, AND THERE IS ALWAYS A CHANCE THAT HE WILL BE ABLE TO MOUNT AN EFFECTIVE CHALLENGE FOR PARTY LEADERSHIP. WE DO NOT THINK THAT HIS "PROMOTION" INCREASES HIS CHANCES.

2. ON FEBRUARY 15 AND 16, FIANNA FAIL HELD ITS ANNUAL CONVENTION, BUT IT AROUSED LITTLE INTEREST OUTSIDE OF NUMEROUS PARTY FAITHFUL. THERE WAS MINIMUM DEBATE ON NI PROBLEM, WHICH IS STILL A CONTENTIOUS ISSUE IN A PARTY OF STRONG "REPUBLICAN" TRADITIONS. JACK LYNCH THUS REMAINS FULLY IN CHARGE OF NI POLICY. THIS IS FORTUNATE FOR PEACE PROSPECTS, AS LYNCH'S PERSONAL POSITION ON NI MATTERS IS SENSIBLE AND QUIET.

3. HOTTEST ISSUE AT CONVENTION WAS "FAMILY PLANNING," WHICH IS PARTY LEADERS' EUPHEMISM FOR CONTRACEPTION. THIS WAS ONLY SUBJECT ON WHICH FIANNA FAIL SCORED EFFECTIVE POINTS AGAINST CURRENT COALITION GOVERNMENT. LYNCH -- AND HEALTH SHADOW MINISTER HAUGHEY -- PROMISED THAT THEIR PARTY WOULD PASS A RESPONSIBLE FAMILY-PLANNING LAW WHEN ELECTED TO POWER. NATURE OF PROMISED LAW WAS NOT SPELLED OUT, BUT FIANNA FAIL PLEDGE NEVERTHELESS SOUNDED MORE RESPONSIBLE THAN ANYTHING CURRENT GOVERNMENT HAS OFFERED. FIANNA FAIL GOT ACROSS THE POINT THAT, UNLIKE CURRENT GOVERNING PARTIES, IT IS CAPABLE OF ACTING DECISIVELY ON TOUGH PROBLEMS.

4. IN OTHER RESPECTS, CONVENTION WAS NOT ABLE TO PRODUCE ANY NEW POLICIES. LYNCH PROMISED THAT NEW PARTY GOALS WOULD BE FORMULATED AND OFFERED FOR DEBATE AT NEXT YEAR'S CONVENTION. BOTH FRIENDS & ENEMIES OF FIANNA FAIL HAVE CALLED FOR IT TO PRESENT A CREDIBLE ALTERNATIVE TO PRESENT GOI. ONE EDITORIAL WRITER HAS ACCUSED FIANNA FAIL OF ACTING LIKE A "GOVERNMENT IN EXILE" RATHER THAN A THINKING, DEMOCRATIC OPPOSITION. WHILE THE CRITICISM IS VALID, IT ALSO POINTS UP FIANNA FAIL'S GREAT ADVANTAGE: FACT THAT IT IS HIGHLY COHESIVE POLITICAL MOVEMENT WHICH APPEALS TO ALL CLASSES AND COMMANDS ALMOST HALF OF IRISH VOTE. MOST OBSERVERS THINK THAT FIANNA FAIL HAS BEEN INCOMPETENT IN OPPOSITION, BUT ALL NEVERTHELESS BELIEVE IT WILL HAVE ITS DAY IN GOVERNMENT AGAIN.

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5. NEXT TEST FOR PARTY WILL BE BY-ELECTION IN TWO WESTERN DISTRICTS MARCH 4. FIANNA FAIL SHOULD WIN BOTH SEATS EASILY. REAL TEST FOR PARTY LEADER LYNCH, HOWEVER, IS WHETHER HE CAN HOLD PERCENTAGE OF VOTE WON IN LAST GENERAL ELECTION. ANY SERIOUS EROSION OF VOTE WOULD WEAKEN LYNCH'S POSITION.

6. AS OPPOSITION LEADER, LYNCH HAS TWO GREAT ADVANTAGES: FIRST, NO CHALLENGERS WITHIN THE PARTY HAVE ANYTHING LIKE HIS BROAD

POPULARITY. SECOND, GOI PERFORMANCE DURING PAST YEAR HAS BEEN AS
MEDIocre AS OPPOSITION'S. NEVERTHELESS, GOVERNING COALITION GIVES
EVERY INDICATION OF FINISHING ITS TERM AND GOING INTO NEXT GENERAL
ELECTION A FEW POINTS AHEAD OF FIANNA FAIL. LYNCH IS THEREFORE
UNDER PRESSURE TO PRODUCE RESULTS.
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